



This was a Hero

by Lang Miller

THE PROWL car purred evenly along Locust Avenue, into and out of the block-apart pools of light from the corner arc-lamps. Officer Hurley, driving, wound the front window on his side halfway

Based on a radio script originally written for the CBS radio program Suspense

By MARTIN RYERSON

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down, leaned his head over the sill, and sniffed long and appreciatively of cool, fresh air.

"Smells good, out here in the suburbs, after the traffic gets off the streets," he said. "Kinda fresh and—sweet-like. Like the air on the farm, early in the mornings."

Officer Norris, riding beside him in the front seat, said nothing. Slumped on the cushion, he stared straight ahead into the night flowing at him over the engine cowling.

A rooster crowed tentatively from among the darkened houses on their left. Hurley looked over his shoulder.

"Gettin' light in the east," he announced. "Time for coffee pretty soon—after you finish your chore."

Norris spoke, for the first time since leaving Central Station.

"I'll want more'n coffee, after I get through *this* assignment."

"Tough," Hurley assented.

"Look, Hurley, why don't you go in and tell her?"

"Nothin' doin', Pete. The Old Man said *you*."

Norris stuck a cigarette in his mouth, snicked at a match with his thumbnail, and broke the match. He swore gently as he lit a second match.

"It's a dirty trick," he said. "There's lots of fellas on the force he could have sent, guys with no feelin' about the case, one way or another. You don't have any connection with the case. Come on, how's about it?"

"No thanks. Anything else. It's one part o' the job always make my stomach crawl."

"Only take a minute. You could —"

"Nix, Pete. This is *your* party, from mixin' the cake to blowin' out the candles. Hey, wasn't that Arcady Boulevard we just crossed?"

"Could be."

"This should be about the neighborhood. Let's see—six-four-two-seven Locust . . ." Hurley snapped on the spotlight, and directed the powerful beam against the fronts of the small houses to the right, slowing the car to a crawl. The houses were all square, stucco jobs, painted in pastel colors.

"Sixty-four-nineteen, sixty-four-twenty-three . . . there she is!"

The blue-white beam of light illuminated the numbers 6427 on a small muddy-yellow "spanish" type house.

Hurley coasted the prowly car to a stop at the curb, switched off the engine.

"Okay, Pete. I'll wait for you."

"Put the light on the door 'til I find the bell, will you?"

Norris got out of the car, and walked slowly up the cement walk, detouring around a kiddie car and a red velocipede. His footsteps clumped loudly on the stoop. He located the bell, pressed it, and signalled Hurley.

The light went off,

The bell trilled brazenly inside the silent house. Norris waited almost a full minute. Then he pushed the button again. Almost immediately, a light flashed on in a window just to the right of the front door. There

was the sound of heels clattering across bare floor, steps on the other side of the door. The hall light was turned on. The knob rattled, and the door opened.

She was small and frail-looking, with a mass of flaming red hair and great blue eyes that grew almost visibly bigger at sight of the blue-uniformed police officer beyond the screen. Her hand went to the throat of the pale-blue dressing-robe, and the blue eyes screamed, he thought, even though no sound came.

Norris felt his scalp tighten at the back of his neck. "You're—Mrs. Miller?"

She spoke, then; that is, gasped. "Some—something's happened?"

Incredible sensations were chasing themselves around and around somewhere inside officer Norris. He swallowed.

"Mrs. Miller—you better brace yourself for a shock."

"What—happened?"

"He had—an accident."

"Not . . ."

"Yes, Mrs. Miller. Dead."

A scream was in the making; she choked it off. She put one transparent-skinned hand against the wall, and her head fell over against it:

"Maybe you better go back in the house, ma'am, and sit down."

She lifted her head, drew a long, shivering breath.

"Y-yes. Come in, please."

He followed her through a curtained archway into a small living-room, furnished with a chair and

sofa suite in a quiet pattern. She sank into the easy chair; Norris sat down gingerly on the sofa.

"Now—was it a car? A fall?"

"No, ma'am." Norris eyed her carefully: "Sure you're okay to hear? It isn't very pretty, Mrs. Miller. It'll be a shock to you."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

Norris drew a long breath. "Mrs. Miller, your husband was—shot."

"Shot?" She was bewildered. "But why . . . how?"

"In a hold-up, ma'am."

"A . . . hold-up?" Her voice was shrill. "Oh, no . . . !"

"At Stover's Warehouse. Eighth and Maple. He was—"

"Oh, but no—it can't be! There's some mistake! Oh, not John! He'd never, never . . ."

She stopped. Norris kept still.

"I see," she said. "Naturally, you wouldn't be here telling me this if it weren't so."

"I'm so damn' sorry, ma'am . . ."

"But . . ." He saw hope leap up again in the blue eyes. "How could you tell it was John? I mean . . ."

Norris drew a brown manila envelope from his pocket.

"Recognize these, ma'am?"

She accepted the driver's license, slowly, fearfully. "Yes, this is his. He was going to get it renewed."

"And this is a photostatic copy of his discharge?"

"Yes . . . yes, those are his."

"They were taken off his body, Mrs. Miller. And this blank application for unemployment insurance."

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"That's right. I knew he had it." "He wasn't working?" "No. He was going to file for the insurance if he didn't find something this week."

"When did you last see him, Mrs. Miller?"

"Late this afternoon. That's where he was going . . . to look for a job. He—he said he wouldn't be back until late, and told me not to wait up."

"Mm." Norris wrote briefly in a notebook.

A small sound snatched his gaze back to her. The red head was bowed over clenched hands. The slim shoulders were shaking and the few strangled sobs Norris could hear were the distilled product of grief.

Large droplets of sweat bulged from Norris's forehead. He sat mute, his eyes on the loose, upswept knot of auburn hair.

Her face finally came up out of her hands. It wore a naked ravaged look, but the wet blue eyes were steady. One last little quavering sigh escaped her.

"I—I'm sorry."

"You've been swell, ma'am." Norris spoke with conviction. He stood up. "Better try to get a little more sleep. Later on, today, they'll probably want you to identify the body. You'll need all the rest you can get."

"I'll see you to the door."

On the front stoop he turned. "If there's anything I can do to help . . ."

"There's nothing. You've been

awfully kind. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Miller."

In the car, Hurley said "Not good, huh?"

"No."

"You tell her?"

"Sure."

Hurley glanced at him. "I mean, did you tell her *you* shot him?"

ONE THING, thought Norris, it'll get lost in the papers. Just another cops-and-robbers shooting, maybe a third of a column in page three. No pictures.

Walking into the 77th Precinct to report, a plainclothes man he didn't know nodded at him, said "Nice work, kid." Sergeant Clow, behind the desk, grinned at him, something that had never happened before, as he took his reports.

"It ain't a good picture," he said, "but them file photos never are, an' the story's a lulu."

"What picture?"

"Now he's actin' modest," Clow said to the room at large. Two brother officers had come in and were grinning, too. "Now tell us you ain't seen the *Journal*."

"I haven't."

Clow threw a folded newspaper, smelling freshly of ink and presses, across to him. "Guess they're fresh outta visitin' generals and strikes. Have fun. Tomorrow you'll be just another harness-bull again."

The picture was two columns wide, in the middle of Page One.

The heavy, black four-column

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headline shrieked "COP HERO KILLS GUNMAN IN WAREHOUSE ROBBERY."

"Right outa the dime detective books," Clow's voice drawled. "Tells how you seen the light flashin' in the warehouse office, sneaked to the door, surprised him tryin' to get into the safe and shot him after he pulled his gun."

"There was a payroll in that safe," added Hurley.

Norris frowned. "This is a hell of a note."

"What is?"

"This stuff about him being an ex-service man."

"So what?" Stephens, one of the other officers, was reading over his shoulder. "How would *you* know? Like the reporter says here, when a guy has a gun and he's about to use it, you don't walk up and say 'Lemme see your discharge papers, buddy.'"

Norris saw a girl's figure bent double with grief. The held-in sobbing was still in his ears; he found himself remembering how soft wisps of red hair had curled at the nape of her neck.

"Calls him 'a victim of the times'." Stephens was still reading. "Distinguished Combat record". Hey, here's a touch! He used the same German Luger he brought home for a souvenir. How about that!"

"A lot of these ex-heroes—" began Hurley.

The phone buzzed on Clow's desk. "Seventy-seventh precinct, Sergeant Clow. Yes, sir. Yes, sir, he's here now. Just came in. I will, sir." He

replaced the phone.

"Well, Norris, looks like seein' that light in the warehouse was the best piece of business you ever did. Captain Marcus wants you, downtown, and he sounds awful happy."

"Which is more," he added, as Norris clumped out, "Than *he* seems to be about it."

"It's his first killin'," said Hurley.

"He'll get used to it," said Clow.

At Central Station, Norris faced a battery of press photogs. He had to pose holding the dead man's Luger.

"How 'bout a smile, Norris," piped a sweating picture-taker, fumbling for another flash-bulb. "Jeeze, anyone would think you was sorry you killed the guy!"

Captain Marcus was a portly man with smooth, gray hair. He waved a well-kept hand at a chair. "Sit down, Norris, sit down. Cigar? No? You'll pardon me, then."

He puffed and eyed Norris benevolently. "Well, you're quite a hero, Norris."

"I never figured it'd draw much attention. Just another robbery, Captain."

"Mm. Captured a lot of people's imaginations—important people, Norris."

"Is that so, sir?"

"Indeed it is. The Commissioner, for one. He was just here. Officer Norris, how would you like to be transferred to the detective division—plain clothes?"

It wasn't as if he hadn't wanted to be a plainclothes man for years.

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Well, there it was—right in his lap. "This is the way it happens," Norris thought. "One day you're on a beat. Next day you're a hero." "Thanks, Captain," he said. "Thanks a lot."

"You don't seem too happy about it, Norris."

"Pardon me, Captain . . . ?"

"I say, you don't seem very much set up over it."

"Oh—oh, I certainly am, Captain. Believe me, this is wonderful." He was remembering the kiddie car on the walk leading up to John Miller's front door.

JOE'S PLACE had certain virtues, in Norris's eyes. It was clean, it was close to the 77th Precinct, and served the best soup-salad-entree-and-dessert package in that part of town.

The juke box was slapping out "On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe" as Norris walked in. It was early in the evening and the place was half-full. Norris was selecting a table when Joe himself hurried up.

"Tonight, Pete, the dinner she's-a on me!"

Norris eyed him tiredly. He felt done in, washed out. It had been a day. "Okay, Joe. Thanks."

The fat little Italian beamed. "Joost-a one t'ing."

"Now what?"

"Please, Pete—I would like-a you please autograph thees menu, hey?"

Norris sat down, shaking his head. "For cri'sake, Joe, You've known me

for years. You've seen me come in and go out and never a second look. Now just because I shoot a man and —okay. Here . . ." He scribbled on a menu and handed it to Joe. "There it is."

"Gee, that's-a swell, Pete. You're a hero, yes?"

"Go on!" Norris waved him away. "Bring me the pot roast."

"Pot roast! Ha! Wait—you see!"

The effervescent Latin dispatched to the kitchen, Norris sat with a glass of Chianti in front of him. For the first time since early in the morning, he was all alone. Now he could think, sort it out for himself, get oriented . . .

Things had begun happening and didn't stop; the spurt of gun-flame in the dark ware-house office, the cavernous crash of echoes and the body on the floor, the little yellow house on Locust Avenue in the glare of Hurley's spotlight, the bell shrilling inside the dark house, steps, the door opening, the blue eyes, eyes that screamed . . .

"Hello, Officer Norris."

The glass of Chianti was overturned on the tablecloth, by Norris's startled hand. Careless of the spreading red stain, he stared up at the girl beside his table.

They were the same blue eyes. Calmer, now. Shadows still, in them and around them; but they looked at him steadily. And now a small smile on the soft mouth, as she looked at the spilled wine.

"I'm sorry. I must have frightened you."

He was finally on his feet, looking down at her, stammering.

"Mrs. Miller!"

She nodded.

"But—I was just—thinking about . . ."

"I hope I'm not bothering you," she said in a low voice. "You were so kind, this morning, when you came to tell me. I—well, I wanted to ask a few more questions."

She was all in black—black tailored suit, black shoes and stockings, a wisp of black hat, with a scrap of veil, perched on the red hair.

"Of course, Mrs. Miller. Sit down, please."

He was awkwardly eager, pulling out a chair for her, holding it while she seated herself.

"Thank you."

She said nothing after he'd reseated himself. She sat looking at him.

"You've eaten?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Some coffee, maybe? A—a glass of wine?"

Joe was there with a fresh tablecloth, mopping, glancing curiously at her as he repaired the damage.

"Nothing, thanks. I just want to talk, if you don't mind."

"I—mind . . . ? Good Lord, no, Mrs. Miller. But—you've seen the papers, haven't you?"

"The papers?"

"I mean, you know by now—I'm the one who . . ."

She fingered the fresh cloth. "Yes. I know. I'm not blaming you—Of-

ficer Norris."

"See here—can you call me Pete? I mean, everybody else does. That is, my friends . . ." He gulped a little.

Her eyes were candid and clear. "Yes, Pete. We might as well be friends. It was your duty. How would you know, or find out? You saw somebody robbing the warehouse, and it was your job to—I want you to know I understand, that's all."

"Gee, Mrs. Miller, it's so darned decent of you not to blame me. All day, I haven't been able to get you—to get it out of my head."

"I know." She gestured quickly. "It was your duty," she repeated. "But . . . Pete . . ."

"But what?"

"I still can't believe John would do such a thing. There must be some mistake, somewhere."

"Mistake?"

"What I'm thinking is—oh, I don't know, it sounds crazy, I know, but—could John have seen a light flashing inside the warehouse, just as you saw it? Maybe he went in to see what was happening, too. John was like that."

"You mean, maybe I shot the wrong person?"

"It's not impossible."

Her big eyes were pleading. Norris found himself thinking, how soft her mouth looks, and not smeared with lipstick, either; just soft, pink lips.

"Yes, Mrs. Miller?" he said quickly.

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She smiled. "I'm Betty. Please." "Betty," he said, looking at her.

"What I mean," she went on, "is maybe the other person, whoever it was, fired once, and ducked, or ran away. It was dark in there, I imagine."

He nodded. "Like a tomb. Big piles of crates and bales of stuff."

"And you thought it was John who'd fired, and he thought it was you . . ."

She made an odd, appealing movement.

"Don't you see, Pete—I've got to believe that's what happened."

He nodded slowly. "Yes, it would make things easier for you."

"Not for me, Pete. For Jigger."

"Jigger?"

"Our—my son."

Norris thought of the kiddie car and the velocipede.

"I—didn't know you had a son."

"He's three. Born just after his daddy shipped overseas. You see now why I've got to believe it happened that way? Why I've got to prove John didn't go there to rob and kill?"

Norris settled deeper in his chair. "Believing it—that's one thing—Betty. Proving it—that's another."

Joe arrived in an aura of savory odors, dealing hot plates off his arm.

"For you, Pete—the best! My own spess'al recipe, tonight. Ah, more wine—for the cop w'at kill-a thees robber!"

"Joe!" Norris half rose in his chair. His furious voice and narrowed eyes sent the little Italian back

a step. He looked at the girl's lowered head. Understanding lit his dark eyes.

"Omigos—Oh, gos', Pete . . ."

"S all right." Norris sat down. "Dammit, I'm sorry, Mrs.—I mean, Betty."

"That's all right. He couldn't have known. Pete . . ."

"Yeah?"

"I know proving it will be hard. That's why I came—to ask you to help."

"But, good Lord, Betty—the trail's cold, now. I——"

"Pete, we've got to find a clue. There must be something."

"What?"

"I don't know. I haven't the faintest idea where to begin. You will help, won't you?"

"But . . ."

"Please, Pete!"

Her beseeching eagerness had brought color to her cheeks. Leaning over the table, she was pleading with eyes, hands, lips.

The policeman let go a heavy sigh. "I'll help," he said.

"Eat your dinner," she said. "We'll talk when you've finished."

"All right."

He ate a few bites. Then he saw Joe, hovering in the kitchen door, and beckoned him over.

"I'll have some coffee, Joe."

"Pete—! You not a-gon' to eat—a my spess'al—"

"I'm sorry, Joe. Just coffee."

The little proprietor took the food away, brought coffee. Norris stirred his cup, saying nothing.

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Finally he said "The gun . . ."

"What gun?"

"His gun—the Luger. Why did he have a gun with him?"

She brightened. "Sure—that only strengthens his case."

"It does?"

"He took it with him to pawn. It was a souvenir he brought back with him from Germany. He figured he could get some money for it."

"But he didn't pawn it."

"I know, Pete. He said if he got the job he went after he wouldn't pawn the Luger."

"You think he got the job, then?"

"I hope he did. I think he did. If he'd gotten the job, he certainly wouldn't have gone on and done a robbery. Johnny just wasn't the robber type, Pete. Johnny was fine."

"Where was the job?"

"I—I don't know that."

"Didn't he tell you where he was going?"

"No, and I never thought of asking. I know that sounds funny, but it's the truth."

"Where did he hear about this—this job?"

"In the paper. The *Journal*—the *Morning Journal*."

"And he went to see about it in the late afternoon?"

"About four. Why?"

"Nothing."

wasn't as if Betty Miller knew it, he told himself candidly—or even suspected it.

All that could wait, anyway.

For the present, he was content to be accepted as a friend and helper, not inclined to force a relationship.

Tiny red curls and appealing blue eyes and a waist a man might almost hold in his two hands . . .

When they left Joe's Place, he took her home, and met Jigger. Jigger wasn't very clear about what had happened in the past twenty-four hours and probably wouldn't be for a long time to come. Jigger had blond curls and a wooly, pink-and-blue dog that barked wheezily when its stomach was squeezed. Jigger liked cops in blue uniforms. He didn't want to go to bed while Norris was there.

And he didn't. It was easy to see that Jigger got his way in the unimportant issues.

It was easy to understand, too. Jigger was a person you didn't want to say "no" to, not ever. It wasn't his hair that felt clean and crisp under your fingers, it wasn't his eyes that laughed at you, it wasn't the way he crawled up into your lap, or the way he said "Pete". It was a combination of all these, and the feelings a man has when he's thinking of a home and a girl and a child and all the things poets have overworked.

Pete Norris went for Jigger in a big way. "How about you and me going steady, bud?" he asked as Jigger managed to get both feet in

ONCE OFFICER Pete Norris admitted to himself he was in love with the wife of the man he had killed, he felt better. It

Pete's coat pocket.

"Wass that? Jigger asked, and put most of one hand in his mouth.

Officer Norris pulled the hand away. "We could go fishing together, and driving, and I could show you lots of things."

"Bears?" Jigger asked.

"Maybe some bears even."

"I like bears," Jigger said. "You wanna see me fly?"

"Can you fly?"

"Sure." Jigger got off Pete's lap and backed a couple of paces away. "Watch."

He flung himself into Pete's lap, and for a fraction of a second his feet left the floor.

"At's flying," Jigger announced.

"It sure is," Pete said. That's flying, all right."

Norris looked around the bright, little living room, with its pretty furniture and its mother and child, and tried to forget Jigger's father and how he had died.

When he said goodnight at the door, he held Betty Miller's hand for just an instant.

He was tired, driving downtown. It had been a hard day. But before going home, he stopped at a newsstand and found a copy of the previous morning's *Journal*.

He took it with him to his boarding-house and spent nearly half an hour on the "Help Wanted—Male" section of the classified ads, jotting pencilled checks opposite several of the listings.

Then he went to bed.

His alarm clock wakened him at

the usual time. He shaved, giving a little more attention to it than usual, going over his chin more closely than was his wont. He dressed in plain clothes, grinned complacently at his blue uniform, draped neatly over a hanger in the closet, and left the room.

He permitted himself an extra side-order of crisp bacon with his usual hotcakes-and. Then he reported in at the detective division. The usual formalities took until almost lunchtime. When they were finised, it was no trouble at all to get the rest of the day off.

He grabbed a sandwich at the little coffee-hutch alongside Central Station, and walked over to the Hall of Justice, where the morgue was.

The attendant in charge, a gray-haired one-time deputy sheriff, knew Norris. A few minutes later he had the envelope containing John Miller's personal effects, spread on a table in an empty office.

There were the driver's license and the discharge photostat. Norris tossed them aside. Some keys and coins followed them, as did a blank application for membership in the American Veterans Council, and a "ruptured duck" pin.

That left the billfold. In it was a limp five-dollar bill and two crisp ones, a picture of Betty Miller with a new-born Jigger in her arms.

Norris grinned at it, and rifled one of those loose, leather flaps which usually hold assorted business cards, and a torn-edged scrap of paper fell away from the flap onto the table.

He picked it up. It was from the classified ad section of the *Journal* of two days ago, the "Help Wanted—Male" section. It had not been marked in any way. Several job offers appeared in the torn piece.

Norris pulled from his pocket the same section, culled from the paper he had purchased the night before, and compared the two for a long time.

Finally he stood up, returned the collection to the brown manila envelope, and took it in to the attendant.

"By the way," he said, with a hand on the doorknob, "anyone else seen this stuff?"

The gaffer peered over his glasses. "Just you fellas," he said. "Routine. I'll hold it until I git the word from Homicide, then release it t' the widda —hey!"

"Hey, what?" Norris took his hand off the knob.

"Why, nothin'—cept that there was one other person saw it—the widda."

"When?"

"She was here yestiddy, t' make identification."

"Sure." Norris opened the door and went away.

He was not grinning any longer.

He found the Maple Garage, on Maple Street, with a minimum of trouble. The shadowy interior was crowded with parked cars. The only sign or sound of life was the resounding swash of driven water against metal, somewhere at the back of the building. Norris walked in

the open door, his footsteps echoing in the raftered spaces overhead. He made a mental note to get some rubber heels.

He found that the water was hitting the gleaming panels of a long, blue sedan. It came from a hose in the hands of a gaunt, tired-looking individual who admitted to the name of Al Crown, and moved about in high rubber boots.

"Yeah," said Crown, "I'm the guy put the ad in the paper."

He did not look at Norris, giving all his attention to directing the spattering against the shiny automobile.

"How long did you have the ad run?"

"A week."

"Get any answers to it?"

Crown decided to look at Norris. "Just who might you be, mister?"

Norris opened one hand to show him a badge. "Get any answers to it?"

"Yeah, sure."

"How many?"

Al Crown turned off the water and started work on the auto body with a soft cloth.

"Three guys," he said.

"Who got the job?"

"They all got it."

"Your ad says a carwasher."

"Sure, that's right. They all had the job—at different times. None of 'em stuck." Crown stopped polishing. "So I gotta wash cars. Me, Crown, the guy that owns the joint. Hand me that sponge, will ya?"

Norris inspected the interior of the

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garage. "Hire anybody night before last?" he asked casually.

"Night before last?" said Crown. "Yeah, I guess so—that was the last one of 'em. A sweetheart too."

"What's that?"

Crown looked hurt. "I just said he was a sweetheart. That guy washed more cars in eight hours than the other guys washed together."

"Happen to remember his name?"

"Name? Name? Let's see . . ."

"Quit stalling!" snapped Norris. "Come on, let's have it!"

Crown stared at him. "What do you mean, stallin'? I'm tryin' to remember. Wait a minute . . . it was Johnny . . . Johnny . . ."

"All right, Johnny what?"

"Well, I was tryin' to think—Miller, that's it! Johnny Miller."

"Well, well," sneered Norris. "So you *do* remember."

"Sure," said Crown. "That what you wanted?"

"What kind of a crack is that?"

The garage man dropped his hands. "No kind of crack," he said. "Look, copper, I—"

"Never mind. What time did Miller leave here the one night he worked?"

"Midnight. Took his seven bucks and blew. Just like all the rest of 'em."

"You haven't read the papers?"

"Papers?" Crown laughed. "That's a hot one. When would I get any time to read? No help, and . . ."

"Who else has been checking up on Miller with you?"

Crown registered surprise. "No one. You're the first—"

"All right, drop it, Crown! Norris was face to face with the garage man, one hand hauling at the front of the greasy shirt. "You aren't kidding anyone. *Who's been here . . . ?*"

"Mister, I'm tellin' you, I don't —"

"Once more, Crown—*who else* has asked you about Miller?"

"All I can tell you is—"

"Shut up!" Norris shoved suddenly, violently, and the man's thin body spun across the floor and smashed against the gleaming blue side of the sedan. Crown shuddered, slid down to the running board, sat there motionless . . .

Norris eyed him for a moment. He turned his back on Al Crown and walked down the lines of parked cars and out the front door into the sunshine on Maple Street. He got into his car and drove fast through the business district and on into the suburbs on the west side of town. Driving out Locust Avenue he went fast until he was across Arcady Boulevard. Then he cut the motor and coasted past Number 6427, around the corner of the next side street, and in to the curb there.

He got out, leaving the keys in the switch, and walked back around the corner onto Locust and along the street to John Miller's house. A blonde-headed kid was trying to make a pink-and-blue woolly dog ride a kiddie car across the fresh green lawn.

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"Hello, Jigger."

The blond youngster let the cherished canine fall off his vehicle with a thump. The animal sighed wheezily at the impact. "Piceman, piceman!" shouted Jigger, running across the lawn.

"No, no, Jigger. Quiet. Mustn't frighten mama."

"Mama in 'ere." He pointed a fat-knuckled finger.

"Sure. You play some more. I'll go get her."

"Okay!" Jigger ran back across the lawn through the sunshine. Norris watched him a moment. He shook his head, went on up the walk, rang the bell.

Footsteps inside . . . the clatter of high heels on bare floors, softer footfalls across the hall carpet . . . the doorknob's now-familiar rattle, the door opening . . .

The blue eyes looked up at him from under a helmet of smooth shining red hair.

"Oh . . . hello, Pete . . ."

"Surprised to see me?"

"Surprised?" She gave a little laugh. "Why . . . no."

He stood on the small porch, looking at her.

"Well . . . aren't you coming in?"

"Sure."

She tripped ahead of him into the living room, her green linen dress crisp as a young lettuce-leaf. Norris, following, could smell some flowery, fresh scent she wore.

His face twisted in a quick grimace and his hands clenched for just an instant. When she turned, his face

was under control.

"You look grim, Pete."

"I do?" He smiled. "How's that?"

"Fine. Well—won't you sit down . . . ?"

"Uh—no thanks. Betty" He stopped.

Her eyes narrowed. "Pete—you've found out something?"

"I guess I have." He bit his lip and looked away from her face for a minute.

"What have you found out, Pete?"

"I—I don't know if . . . Betty, have you . . ."

His eyes were fixed on the low coffee table in front of the sofa.

"What is it, Pete?"

He was beside the coffee table, looking down at the newspaper lying there, open to the classified ads. One of the ads was circled in red, as if by a heavy pencil. Or by a lipstick.

"Pete . . ."

He turned slowly, heavily.

"So you *do* know?"

She fell back a step before the look on his face.

"Know what?"

"You *did* see Crown."

"See who?"

He moved toward her, and she was backing away, toward the archway into the dining room.

"You know he got the job. You saw that clipping in his billfold."

"He . . . John . . . what are you going to do to me?"

She came up against a hard surface—the dining table. Norris's eyes

THIS WAS A HERO

were chained to her face as he came slowly on.

She screamed. "You were the one! You robbed the warehouse!"

In one violent movement, his hand clamped over her mouth, an arm pinioned her arms, and she was being bent backward over the edge of the table. The slender body jerked to and fro in the man's iron grip.

He spoke. "It's too bad, Betty. I—I never meant to do it. He was just a guy who came in at the wrong time. If only you hadn't—"

Imperceptibly, his grasp lessened. A lightning twist of her slender body and she was away from him and across the room.

"Help! Help . . ."

He followed her, cursing, and a hammer-blow from behind propelled him, staggering, out of control, through the archway, against the coffee table.

Hurley towered over him. As Norris struggled to regain his feet, he hit him again. Norris slumped, dazedly, shaking his head.

Metal bracelets snicked together over his wrists.

"Do I work him over a little more, Captain?"

Captain Marcus shook his head. "He's a good boy, now."

He walked over and looked down at Norris. "Well, smart boy, crime doesn't pay, does it?"

Norris was sullenly silent.

"Mrs. Miller checked on that newspaper clipping in Miller's bill-fold, too, Norris—while you were playing hero. Kind of gave her an idea. She worked with us, like a Trojan. That Crown, too—he's another. You nearly killed him, Norris—but he's a tough little guy. He'll be all right."

He turned to Betty Miller, crouched in a chair, sobbing heartbrokenly.

"I'm sorry it had to be like this, Mrs. Miller. You're another tough guy, Mrs. Miller, tough the good way. Thanks to you, Jigger will never have to be ashamed of his father. The newspapers'll take care of that."

Betty Miller wiped her eyes.

"You've been wonderful, Captain." "I wish you could have found it out some other way, Mrs. Miller. Your husband must have been a great lad, Mrs. Miller. I can understand how he made that record in Europe." He turned to the sofa.

"All right, Norris, let's go!"

The ex-cop got slowly to his feet. Marcus surveyed him witheringly.

"You—a detective!" he said scornfully. "You never even thought to ask Mrs. Miller how it was she happened to know where to find you that night at Joe's Place!"

"Come on, Norris," said Hurley.



THE EARLY BIRDMAN

RAADIO is a serious business, with split-second timing on programs. It says here.

We are reminded of a certain adventure show which we will call, for the purposes of this narrative, "The Green Ace."

The opening signature of this show was the sound of an airplane zooming down in a screaming power dive, leveling off, and fading out.

On this particular day, the signal "Thirty Seconds" had been given, and the cast took their places. The sweep hand of the clock ticked off 59, and the director dropped his hand.

The sound began, swelling from a low level to a vibrating, screaming roar. Then . . .

CRRRRASSSSH!

Then a horrified silence, broken by the announcer's excited: "My God, he didn't make it this week!"

After they had revived the director, they explained it was all a gag. They had set the clock up five minutes before dress rehearsal, and hadn't been on the air.